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# Working Internationally

## ATG INTERVIEWS JANET GILLIGAN, USIA LIBRARIAN

by Ron Chepesiuk (782 Wofford St., Rock Hill SC 29730; phone: 803-323-2131) <110423.2656@compuserve.com>

**M**any of us have thought about working professionally in some foreign country and wondered what it would be like. An overseas job conjures up images of fine food, fascinating museums, exotic travel and perhaps romance. How do we go about finding an overseas job and would the reality of such an experience match the dream? To find out the pros and cons of such a career move, *ATG* decided to interview Janet Gilligan, a veteran librarian of the international scene. A native of Niagara Falls, New York, and a M.A. graduate of the University of Michigan library school, Gilligan worked for nine years as an academic librarian in both public and technical services at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, before joining the USIA in 1980. As a federal civil servant abroad, Gilligan has worked in several countries in Asia, Europe, India and Latin America. She has found time to be an active member to the American Library Association since 1976 and has served on several committees. From 1989 to 1990, she was the Agency's program officer for the joint ALA/USIA Library Fellows Program.

*ATG: How did you become a librarian?*

**JG:** As with most of us, sort of by accident. I had completed my MA in English and tried teaching junior high school in the Ann Arbor area, but found that wasn't my thing. As a graduate student's wife, I then got an interesting job as an administrative assistant in a small consulting firm in town, but knew it wasn't a career path. Several other graduate student wives were in library school. "Come join us," they encouraged, and so I did. I was fortunate to receive a Work/Study scholarship at the University of Michigan, and, since I already had a Master's degree, the library

science program only took one full year even though I worked thirty hours a week. I graduated from Michigan with my MLS in the summer of 1971, but actually, my first real library job was at age 14 as a library page in the Niagara Falls Public Library. I started out at 75 cents an hour! My first professional job was as a serials cataloger at Colorado State University (CSU) in 1972.

*ATG: When did you get interested in international librarianship?*

**JG:** Again, by accident. I've always been interested in meeting people from other parts of the world, especially at Michigan, where I had several good foreign friends. At CSU, I served as a "host family" for foreign students for many years. By 1978, I was looking at new job possibilities and at ALA Midwinter a friend noticed an ad for a Regional Library Consultant with the then United States Communication Agency (now the US Information Agency). They actually wanted people with library experience in both the technical and public service areas, and although I had just two plus years in Reference, I applied and got the job. Soon afterwards, the USIA library in Islamabad was bombed! It was not the best time to enter the foreign service, but almost two years later, on September 15, 1980, I took my oath of office.

*ATG: Was it a difficult move to make?*

**JG:** No. I was ready for a change. But, I did and sometimes still do miss an academic community.

*ATG: Could you describe the USIA library you work in now?*

**JG:** Our USIS (overseas we are called the Information Service) library in Mexico City is called the Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin (BBF), and it's the USIA's first and oldest library. As the first official U.S. government

library abroad, it opened its doors to the public on April 20, 1942. Established to promote "friendship through books," the BBF

was financed by a sizable U.S. government grant to the American Library Association, which administered the library during its first five years. A success from its beginning, the BBF became a model for the many government libraries created throughout the world in the years following WWII as part of an expanded U.S. cultural relations program. Today, the library has approximately 25,000 books, 200 plus periodicals, access to Lexis-Nexis, Legi-Slate, Dialog, the Internet and many CD-ROMs. We have five professional librarians, three paraprofessionals studying for a library degree and five other staff members.

*ATG: By the way, how many professional librarians are there working for USIA?*

**JG:** If you mean Americans, there are currently about twenty-three of us.

*ATG: Yes, I do. Could you describe a typical day?*

**JG:** There is hardly one. Since I am the director of the BBF, staff, building and collection management consume a great deal of my time. I also meet with colleagues from USIA to provide library and information assistance to USIA programming. Calls come to me from all sections of USIA — the Press/Cultural Section, the Embassy, the American School, academic and research institutions in Mexico ... looking for all sorts of things. I easily spend an hour or two responding to emails from colleagues in Mexico, my home office in Washington, and from colleagues around the world. In addition, I cover library and information matters for our posts in Guatemala and Honduras. At certain times, issues in those countries occupy my time.

We are busy training our USIS librarians and our non-librarians throughout Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras on how to use the Internet and utilize other elec-



tronic resources that are available to them through USIA headquarters in Washington. I spend a good amount of time teaching myself how to use these resources so that I am able to teach others, or at least point them to useful databases and Internet sites.

*ATG: Are there any special benefits that you have that you wouldn't have working outside of international government service?*

**JG:** Absolutely! The opportunity to travel extensively, to meet and work with people of different cultures and backgrounds, and hopefully to contribute to a better understanding of the U.S., its people and culture to people with whom I interact. In addition, this career has taught me much more about myself — my strengths, weaknesses, prejudices, and so forth. When adapting to new cultures, one has to reevaluate what one believes and what one deems important much more often than one does living in the U.S. We constantly hear about change being a part of every professional's life these days. In this profession change has always been a constant.

*ATG: What tips can you give to someone who wants to get a job at the international level?*

**JG:** Start knowing some foreign people and take an interest in them, their culture, societies, political systems, etc. Learn a new language. Volunteer to host foreign visitors and/or students. If none exists, organize a sister-brother relationship with a foreign institution. In other words, get involved. Volunteer for any and all projects your institution has with foreign populations. It is amazing how many librarians are involved in international activities.

*ATG: How are library job prospects at the USIA today?*

**JG:** As a matter of fact, I un-

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derstand that USIA will be advertising for new librarians and information professionals shortly. Within the next five years, many of my colleagues will be retiring and, recognizing the long timeframe that recruitment and hiring take, the Agency is aware that it must begin recruitment now.

**ATG:** *How does one go about applying for a job?*

**JG:** Send the United States government application form to the USIA personnel office in Washington DC. That horrible form 171. Look for upcoming advertisements in the print and electronic job sources.

**ATG:** *Should age be a consideration for someone who wants to work at the international level?*

**JG:** I believe persons must be under age 60 when they are hired.

**ATG:** *What is the most difficult part of being an international librarian?*

**JG:** Finding your niche in a new environment and discovering what you can contribute to an already existing program without disrupting and reinventing the wheel. Remember our foreign national staffs have to get used to a new boss every three or four years. What a nightmare for them!

**ATG:** *What is the fun part?*

**JG:** Working with wonderful foreign nationals who are dedicated to the goals and objectives of our information and public diplomacy programs. It is also extremely rewarding to meet our foreign contacts and to get to know them and their countries and cultures first hand. No amount of reading can substitute for the real thing.

**ATG:** *How long do you stay at a particular assignment at the USIA?*

**JG:** Most assignments are for three or four years, although some hardship posts — Lagos in Nigeria, for example — are only two-year assignments.

**ATG:** *What has been your favorite assignment at USIA?*

**JG:** One hates to select one's favorite because it implies the others were not so hot. I believe every assignment enhances one's

life, just a little differently. Work wise, I guess for me India was really special. It was hard — hard living, hard traveling and hard work — but oh so rewarding. I had two hats, that of librarian and quasi-book publisher, and I also was active in the cultural programs of the post. For example, I had the wonderful opportunity to work with poets **Donald Hall** and **Jane Kenyon** not just once but twice while they were in India as USIA speakers. In addition, my USIS colleagues and I co-produced Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation" with a fantastic Indian English language theater company. How many librarians get to have so much fun? I learned so much from my Indian contacts — so much more than they learned from me.

**ATG:** *What other opportunities are there for an American librarian to work internationally?*

**JG:** USIA still has a Fulbright program. Often there are positions for librarians, and they will sometimes be available for practicing librarians, not just educators. Many AID projects have an information component, so look into those. Foreign institutions do advertise for American librarians. Check out the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on a regular basis. Go to a meeting of **IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations)** or join **ALA's IRRT (International Relations Roundtable)**. Make it known that you want to do something in the international field. These are just a few suggestions that come to mind.

**ATG:** *You have remained active in ALA for several years. Is that a difficult thing to do working at the international level?*

**JG:** Since I worked in our Washington office for over five years in the late 80s, I was able to keep involved. I was also fortunate to work closely with the ALA/USIA Library Fellows Program during that time. I am able now to be active only because I am in such proximity to the U.S. and can attend regular meetings from Mexico. Email, too, has made it ever so much more possible than ever before. In addition, please note that USIA does encourage attendance at professional conferences, so that whenever we have the opportunity many of my colleagues also attend.

**ATG:** *When ALA takes polls of its members, internationalism is invariably a low priority. How do you explain this?*

**JG:** Simply because most members haven't experienced the joy of it all. Once they do, it rates high on their list. There are many other reasons for this but one is definitely monetary. Most librarians don't make enough money to go to IFLA on their own or to get active in ALA's international affairs. Hence they simply don't see internationalism as important in their lives. ALA's recent initiative to help support members attendance at the **Guadalajara Book Fair** was a wonderful example of exposing a whole group of librarians to something foreign/international. Kudos to ALA and the Guadalajara Book fair for experimenting. It was a plus for both sides of the equation.

**ATG:** *Do you have any suggestions on how ALA could encourage internationalism on the part of its members?*

**JG:** More **Guadalajara Book Fair** type activities for starters. ALA can perhaps recruit new members to get involved in IRRT by offering one-year free memberships, which will allow librarians to get exposed to internationalism early on in their careers. More emphasis can be placed on internationalism in public and school divisions, too. Many more librarians in the academic community are involved, but it doesn't have to be so.

**ATG:** *What are some of the international issues you think are important for American librarians to be aware of?*

**JG:** The importance of standards, intellectual property rights, and, of course, intellectual freedom issues. In addition, strengthening library education and continuing education programs for developing countries is an extremely important issue.

**ATG:** *Do you get as much chance to travel as one would think?*

**JG:** No, but that is sometimes a matter of personal circumstances. Many of us have personal commitments — for example, families in the States or living with us at posts — and hence many "vacations" are often spent going home to the States. Also, when one travels frequently on

business, the last thing one wants to do is travel. Sometimes just staying at home looks really good.

**ATG:** *You are married. What does your husband do?*

**JG:** Currently, he is not working outside the home. He is as he says "taking care of me."

**ATG:** *How does working at the international level affect married life?*

**JG:** It can be very difficult especially for those who travel a lot in their positions. Also, young families have many more considerations, such as health conditions and how they affect children; quality of schools. Also employment for spouses is a real problem. Even though the foreign service has made many efforts to provide employment at embassies for spouses, the salaries are probably one half to one third what he/she might be earning in the U.S. It is not easy and I would recommend that anyone coming into the international field give very careful consideration to these aspects of foreign life. For many it is wonderful; for others, a disaster.

**ATG:** *Have you ever considered going back to the domestic library scene or do you plan to spend the rest of your career with the USIA?*

**JG:** No, in fact, I am currently thinking about my next "career." Whatever it is, I hope it includes an international aspect.

**ATG:** *What do you do in your spare time?*

**JG:** I read a lot of fiction and go to movies. I'm a child of the movies and I love them. Here in Mexico, we thoroughly enjoy traveling throughout the country and are avid museum goers.

**ATG:** *What are your future professional goals?*

**JG:** Prepare our USIS foreign national staffs for USIA's transition into the State Department in October 1999. That's going to keep us real busy. 🌳

**NB:** **Ron Chepesiuk** is Professor and Head of Special Collections, Winthrop University, Rock Hill SC. His interviews have included Yasser Arafat, Jimmy Carter, Abbie Hoffman, Noam Chomsky, Coretta Scott King and Evander Holyfield, among others.